

Strengthening Neighborhood Business Districts

Creating and strengthening vibrant neighborhood business districts is an important part of Seattle's Comprehensive Plan. This Neighborhood Business District Strategy (NBDS) provides a blueprint for revisiting policies and regulations in mixed-use commercial centers outside of downtown, and will update cumbersome and outdated zoning regulations.

Development regulations that apply in Neighborhood Business Districts (Commercial and Neighborhood Commercial zones) were originally adopted in 1986. Since then, repeated amendments to the Land Use Code have made it more complex and difficult to use. In addition, the Comprehensive Plan and Neighborhood Plans have been adopted, placing new emphasis on business districts.



Pedestrian-friendly streetscapes—like this one in the Madison Park neighborhood—enhance neighborhood character and business vitality.

Neighborhood Business District Strategy

Primary Goal:

Strengthen Seattle's Comprehensive Plan's urban village strategy

Objectives:

1. Support job creation and business vitality (pg. 6)
2. Protect and enhance neighborhood character (pg. 7)
3. Improve the pedestrian environment (pg. 8)
4. Provide housing growth in neighborhood business districts (pg. 9)
5. Achieve quality design through development flexibility (pg. 10)
6. Support transit connections (pg. 11)
7. Balance parking needs (pg. 12)
8. Make the Land Use Code easier to use (pg. 13)



Vacant retail storefronts do not create active and vibrant streetscapes.

Background



The Press Building in the Pike/Pine neighborhood has many components of a successful new mixed-use building: viable, pedestrian-oriented space at ground level, with residential or other uses above.

In response to concerns voiced by community groups, developers, architects, and business organizations, Mayor Nickels directed the Department of Planning and Development (DPD) to review commercial code requirements and recommend improvements to the City's regulations.

An advisory committee of various stakeholders—including architects, neighborhood residents, developers, business owners, and planners—met throughout 2003 to discuss ways to improve Seattle's commercial code requirements. In consultation with the advisory committee, DPD has proposed a strategy to update and improve Seattle's commercial zoning.

The Neighborhood Business District Strategy makes no change to basic zoning.

- No rezones from, or changes to, residential or industrial zones
- No significant changes in height, bulk, or expected densities
- No changes to the primary role of commercial zones as places where business is conducted and goods and services are provided

Why Re-evaluate Zoning?

DPD is re-evaluating commercial zoning because:

- The original regulations were adopted in 1986—almost 20 years ago.
- The City has adopted policies for managing growth since zoning regulations were last comprehensively revised.
- We have gained experience and new insights from new development.
- Numerous amendments to the Land Use Code have made the code more complex and difficult to use.
- New processes, such as design review, offer opportunities for flexibility while meeting City and neighborhood goals for a quality urban landscape.

Many older buildings, built well before Seattle's Land Use Code, provide good models for the future.



A pedestrian-friendly development located on Broadway in the Pike/Pine neighborhood.

Seattle's Comprehensive Plan and Urban Village Strategy



The Epicenter Building in Fremont features awnings, vegetation, and gathering spaces—all details that make business districts more inviting.

Seattle's Comprehensive (Comp) Plan directs Seattle's share of regional growth to urban centers and urban villages. Urban centers and villages are business areas surrounded by residential areas; nearly all are pedestrian-friendly, transit-oriented, mixed-use areas. The Comp Plan goals are to:

- Support walking and the use of public transportation by promoting density and mixed-use
- Direct the greatest share of future development to urban centers and villages.
- Reduce the potential for dispersed growth along arterials and in other areas not conducive to walking, transit use and cohesive community development.
- Establish concentrations of employment and housing in urban villages at densities and with mixes of uses that reflect the varying character of each area.
- Provide for more efficient use of limited land resources and pursue a development pattern that is more economically sound.
- Increase public safety by making villages "people places" at all times of day.
- Collaborate with the community in planning for the future.

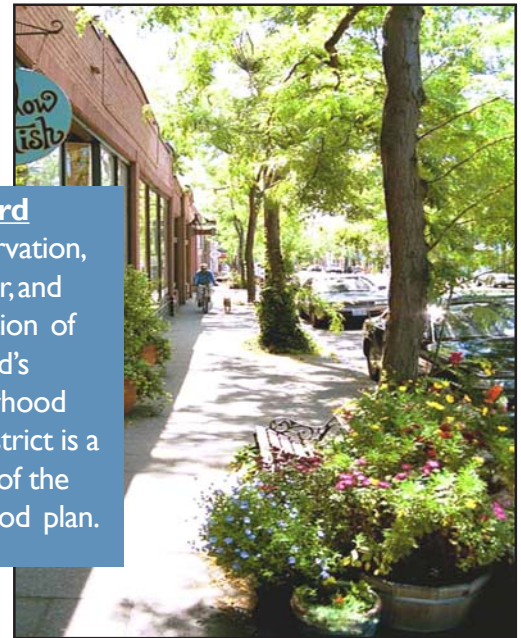
Implementing Neighborhood Plans

The Neighborhood Business District Strategy Supports **Neighborhood Planning** by:

- Enhancing vital business districts
- Encouraging a viable mix of commercial and residential uses
- Supporting active and aesthetically pleasing pedestrian environments
- Promoting good urban design and building design
- Creating appropriate transitions to surrounding neighborhoods

Ballard

The preservation, character, and revitalization of Ballard's neighborhood business district is a top goal of the neighborhood plan.



Rainier Beach

The plan calls for mixed-use and pedestrian-oriented development in its commercial core.



Roosevelt

The plan provides design incentives that allow flexibility in building heights, while improving the quality of streetscapes and new buildings.



Support Business Vitality and Job Creation

The Neighborhood Business District Strategy will focus on:

Greater Flexibility - allowing for business expansion and turnover to help small business. Encouraging timely leasing of commercial spaces, greater adaptability, and innovation

Residential Development - allowing greater opportunity for residential development within business zones

Size Limits - accommodating a greater variety of commercial activity and expansion while minimizing impacts on the surrounding community

Parking - balancing parking requirements with pedestrian and transit orientation

Viable business districts contain diverse commercial ventures. As economic trends change, the City is challenged to maintain zoning that complements a variety of business practices and changing market demands.

Zoning influences the distribution, size, and location of businesses, encouraging smaller, neighborhood-serving businesses in neighborhood business districts, and larger businesses in areas oriented to a larger market.



Diverse business types help give neighborhoods distinctive character, as found in the Broadway Business District.

Maintain Compatibility with Surrounding Neighborhoods

Seattle's residents care for their neighborhoods. New buildings must contribute to neighborhood character and minimize negative impacts. Zoning helps regulate height limits and setbacks.

In addition, Seattle's Design Review Program helps create better quality development. Design Review emphasizes that new development should respond to the neighborhood's character and architectural expression. Design guidelines influence the siting and orientation of new development, the relationship of height, bulk and scale to the surrounding neighborhood, architectural design and materials, and the pedestrian character of new buildings.

This new commercial building near Seward Park echoes the scale and pattern of the surrounding residential-oriented streetfront.



The Neighborhood Business District Strategy will focus on:

Pedestrian Orientation - strengthening pedestrian-friendly requirements to make more walkable neighborhoods

Neighborhood Individuality - maintaining current neighborhood-specific requirements that are responsive to a neighborhood's particular conditions or unique circumstances

Innovation - encouraging better design solutions for new buildings and open spaces

Reduce Vacancies - encouraging in-fill of vacancies or under-used spaces



A historic mixed-use building in the Mt. Baker neighborhood

Improve the Pedestrian Environment

A new building on a pedestrian-designated street (left) would not be allowed to have parking at streetfront (right).



The Neighborhood Business District Strategy will focus on:

Balancing Parking and Pedestrians - discouraging parking lots from being located on corners and at key intersections within urban villages; discouraging some uses, such as drive-in businesses, to minimize auto-pedestrian conflicts

Public Amenities - encouraging open spaces and public amenities to be developed at street level, directly adjacent to the street

Neighborhood Vitality - requiring design features for street-level use that contribute interest and activity at the street level and reduce barriers to changes of use to encourage economic vitality and efficient turnover among neighborhood businesses; allowing residential uses at the street level in areas where commercial uses may not be marketable, to reduce commercial vacancies

Seattle is a city of pedestrian-friendly neighborhoods. Some of the characteristics that make Seattle "friendly" to pedestrians include: the close proximity of homes, stores and jobs; reliable transit service; and building and street designs that encourage people to safely linger, shop and walk.

The City currently encourages pedestrian- and transit-oriented development by addressing the following:

- Parking location and access that does not conflict with pedestrians.
- Pedestrian enhancements, including overhead weather protection, blank façade limitations, and requirements for façade transparency.
- Open spaces that enhance the public right of way.
- Design that includes wider sidewalks, curb bulbs, improved crosswalks, and uses at street level.



The Land Use Code requires transparency for portions of facades. Blank facades are only allowed in short lengths in pedestrian-designated areas.

Provide for Housing Growth

Neighborhoods frequently identify increased housing opportunities as important to meeting their goals for their business districts. Currently, zoning requirements make little distinction between areas inside or outside urban centers and villages, creating a need for better tools to meet Neighborhood Planning and Comprehensive Plan goals.



Amenities, such as roof decks or outdoor open space, can make urban housing and lifestyles more attractive.

The Neighborhood Business District Strategy will focus on:

Increasing Housing Opportunities - allowing residential-only structures in areas that are not critical for retail or other commercial enterprises

Pedestrian Orientation - emphasizing the pedestrian-oriented nature of the urban village as a desirable residential setting, while also ensuring that residential street fronts contribute to a pedestrian-friendly environment.

Neighborhood Character - creating flexible ways to accommodate different neighborhood goals, such as encouraging additional housing densities or a more diverse commercial environment

Amenities - encouraging a mix of amenities that will respond to the needs of new residents, such as open spaces, decks, balconies, and shared indoor recreation spaces



This residential development on the edge of the East Madison Business District includes design features that help maintain a pedestrian-oriented streetfront.

Build On Design Review

The Neighborhood Business District Strategy will focus on:

Simplification and Flexibility - simplifying development standards where it may allow designs that better respond to a neighborhood's characteristics (examples include a floor area ratio system for managing the bulk of buildings)

Alternative Approaches - considering a system that allows two alternatives for review: 1) buildings built to prescriptive standards would move forward more easily, and 2) buildings that have innovative designs or unusual sites would use a review process that allows more flexibility based on clear design criteria

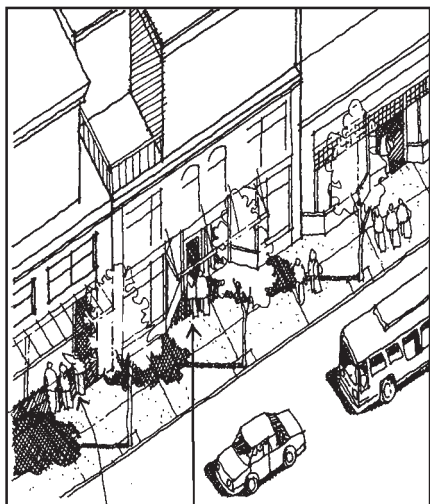
Not all neighborhoods are the same, and specific projects can have distinct challenges because of the type of use or site constraints.

In the past, it was often necessary to amend the Land Use Code to provide exceptions for projects that would further City goals, but could not meet prescriptive standards. This has resulted in narrowly crafted Code conditions that respond to legitimate concerns but may discourage innovation and development that would further Comprehensive and Neighborhood Plan objectives. It also serves to make the Code longer, more complex and difficult to understand or interpret.

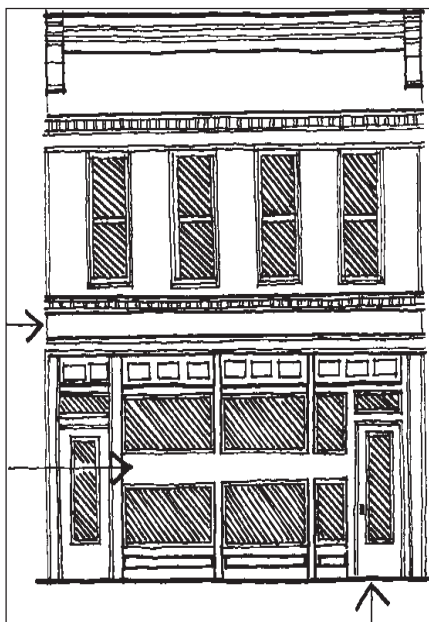
Tools are necessary that can respond to unique conditions with flexibility while making sure that the City and neighborhood goals are being met. Design Review is one such tool.

Seattle's Design Review Program provides a forum through which neighborhoods, developers, architects, and City staff can work together to ensure that new developments contribute positively to Seattle's neighborhoods. It has three principal objectives:

1. To encourage better design and site planning;
2. To provide flexibility in the application of development standards; and
3. To improve communication and participation among stakeholders early in the design and siting of new development.



Neighborhood-specific design guidelines have helped neighborhood business districts shape the character of new development.



Support Transit Connections

Facilitating local transit, pedestrian, and bicycle access is key to Seattle's urban village strategy. Getting to jobs, regional transit links, employment centers, and goods and services is a high priority.

The cumulative impact of automobiles in the region is having increasingly negative impacts. Seattle's long-term goal is to provide a range of transportation options and dense, compact pedestrian-oriented urban villages where walking and transit use will be pleasant and convenient.

Continuing to accommodate automobile-oriented uses and their associated environments makes it difficult for new, pedestrian-oriented neighborhood business districts to develop. Numerous curb cuts, streets dominated by surface parking lots, and the scarcity of housing makes for a streetscape that is often unsafe or unfriendly to the pedestrian, and discourages transit use.

Facilitating quick transit connections between neighborhoods is a key component of the Neighborhood Business District Strategy.



An active bus stop in front of the Broadway Market



The Neighborhood Business District Strategy will focus on:

Increasing Housing - furthering the Comprehensive Plan goal of increased housing density in pedestrian-friendly urban centers and villages, close to jobs, goods, and services

Pedestrians - expanding successful pedestrian-oriented requirements, creating more walkable, transit-oriented neighborhoods

Safety - addressing the need for safe solutions for pedestrian and transit access in auto-oriented commercial areas through the siting and placement of buildings and street improvements

Transit Options - building on local and regional transit to provide options to help increase mobility to the City's urban centers and villages

Balance Parking Needs



The location of the parking entrance for this new mixed-use building in Uptown minimizes conflict between pedestrians and traffic.

The City regulates off-street parking in three ways:

- **Quantity** - The amount of parking, particularly when free, is a major determinant for people's travel mode choices.
- **Location** - The location of parking lots greatly affects overall neighborhood character.
- **Access** - Poor access to parking constrains building and streetscape design, conflicts with pedestrians, and ineffectively uses available parking resources.

The Neighborhood Business District Strategy will focus on:

Creating the Right Mix and Supply of Parking - strengthening urban villages to make Seattle's transit investments work better, reducing drive-alone trips and creating consistency with car ownership rates and neighborhood parking demand

Enhancing Neighborhoods - minimizing the supply of commuter parking in business districts to reduce impermeable surfaces, reduce traffic congestion during peak hours, and improve pedestrian-orientation and design, encouraging more people to walk, ride bicycles, or use transit

The Land Use Code and related review processes are the City's principal tools for influencing the quantity, location of, and access to, off-street parking. Seattle's current parking requirements were derived from national models using mainly suburban, auto-oriented transportation conditions and are often contrary to the Comprehensive Plan's urban village strategy.

City parking goals address several aspects of the parking mix:

Commuters: Traffic congestion is partially caused by an oversupply of long-term parking, which encourages auto use at peak times, straining roadway capacity and limiting transit's effectiveness.

Shoppers: City parking policies support short-term on and off-street parking in neighborhood business districts to promote customer access, even though the City's current parking regulations do not always distinguish between the kind of parking that gets built.

Residents: In urban villages Seattle's current parking requirements for residential development do not reflect actual car ownership. Close proximity to employment centers, goods and services and convenient transit reduces car ownership. The City must carefully balance the costs of providing parking with new housing and residents' needs.

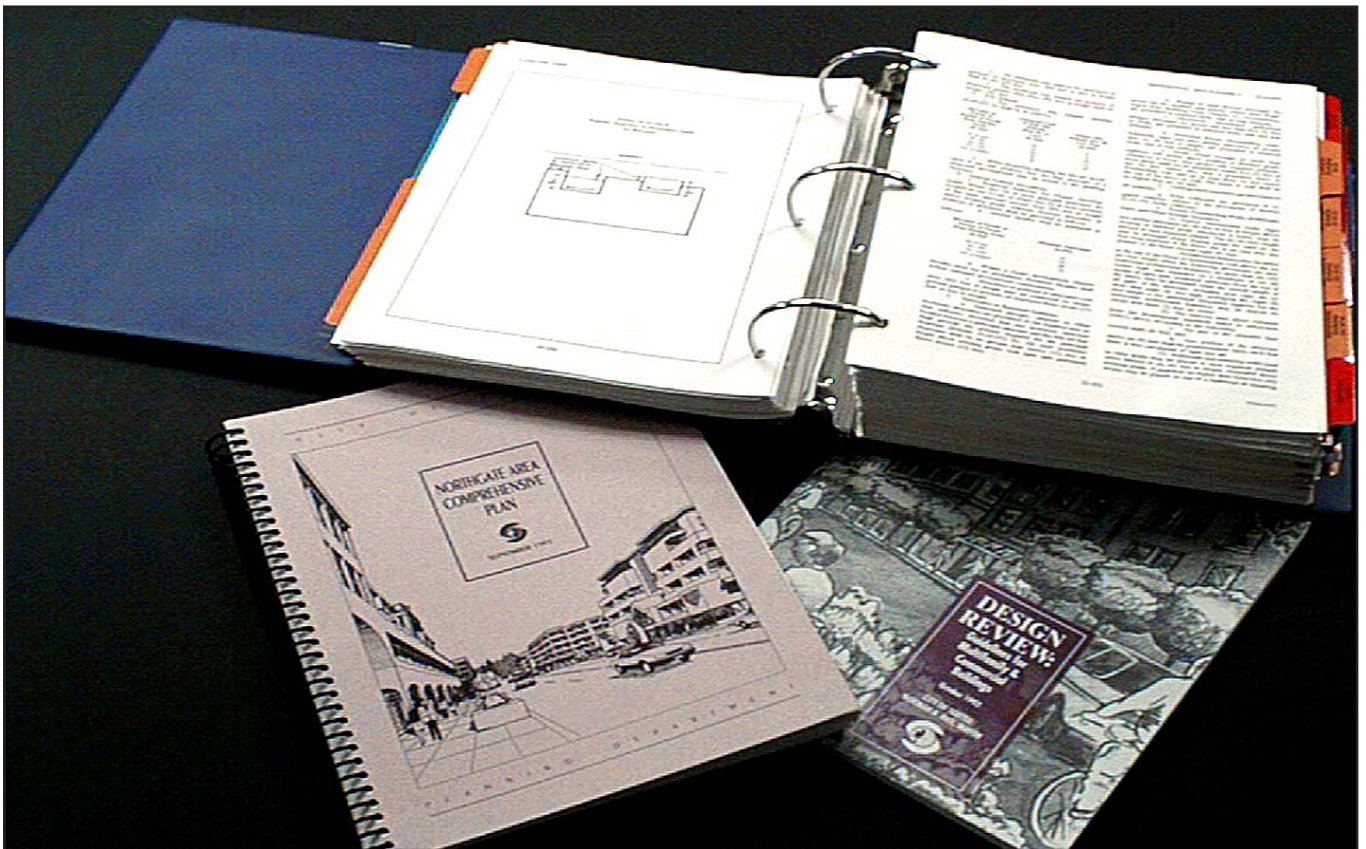
Make the Code Easier to Use

The Land Use Code has been updated and amended many times in the past 20 years. This has made it complex and difficult to use.

Because it is an important tool to accomplish City goals and objectives, and is also used by the public—planners, architects, and developers—a simpler, more legible code is vital.

The Neighborhood Business District Strategy will focus on:

Ease of Use - improving the legibility of the commercial chapter of the Land Use Code, by making it easier to navigate and read, for example, using larger fonts, section headings, charts and graphs, and more diagrams to explain rules



The Land Use Code has been updated and amended many times in the past 20 years, making it complex and difficult to use.

Existing Zoning

Seattle’s current code contains two general types of commercial zones: pedestrian-oriented (**NC**) and auto-oriented (**C**).

Mixed-use buildings support the Comprehensive Plan’s urban village strategy by creating a more pedestrian-friendly environment. There are no residential density limits in mixed-use buildings, while residential-only buildings have density limits and are allowed only as a “conditional use.”

This results in a substantial incentive for mixed-use

development. While site size, parking requirements and other development standards limit the total number of residences in a building, the incentive for mixed-use buildings has been extremely successful.

Two special designations apply within some NC zones, called **Pedestrian 1 (P1)** and **Pedestrian 2 (P2)**. They are intended to encourage pedestrian-oriented shopping areas by requiring retail and service uses, and limit parking and vehicular access.

Neighborhood Commercial 1 (NC1)	Allows a range of pedestrian-oriented retail, entertainment, and commercial service establishments; encourages mixed-use buildings; and allows residential uses.
Neighborhood Commercial 2 (NC2)	
Neighborhood Commercial 3 (NC3)	
Commercial 1 (C1)	Accommodates automobile-oriented and more intensive commercial uses, such as auto oriented retail establishments, wholesale and warehouse uses and light manufacturing; residential uses are allowed in C1 zones and discouraged in C2 zones.
Commercial 2 (C2)	



A typical example of a building in an NC1 zone



A well-designed mixed-use building in an NC3 zone



C1 and C2 zones are intended for auto-oriented uses like this one



Office uses are allowed in any of the NC or C zones

Work to define the Neighborhood Business District Strategy began in 2003, followed by input from an advisory committee of diverse stakeholders to help develop the strategy outlined in this brochure.

The April 13, 2004 public kickoff meeting is the first opportunity for public input on the strategy. It will be followed by meetings with neighborhood planning and business groups, as well as follow-up public meetings to discuss the strategy in more detail in the summer of 2004.

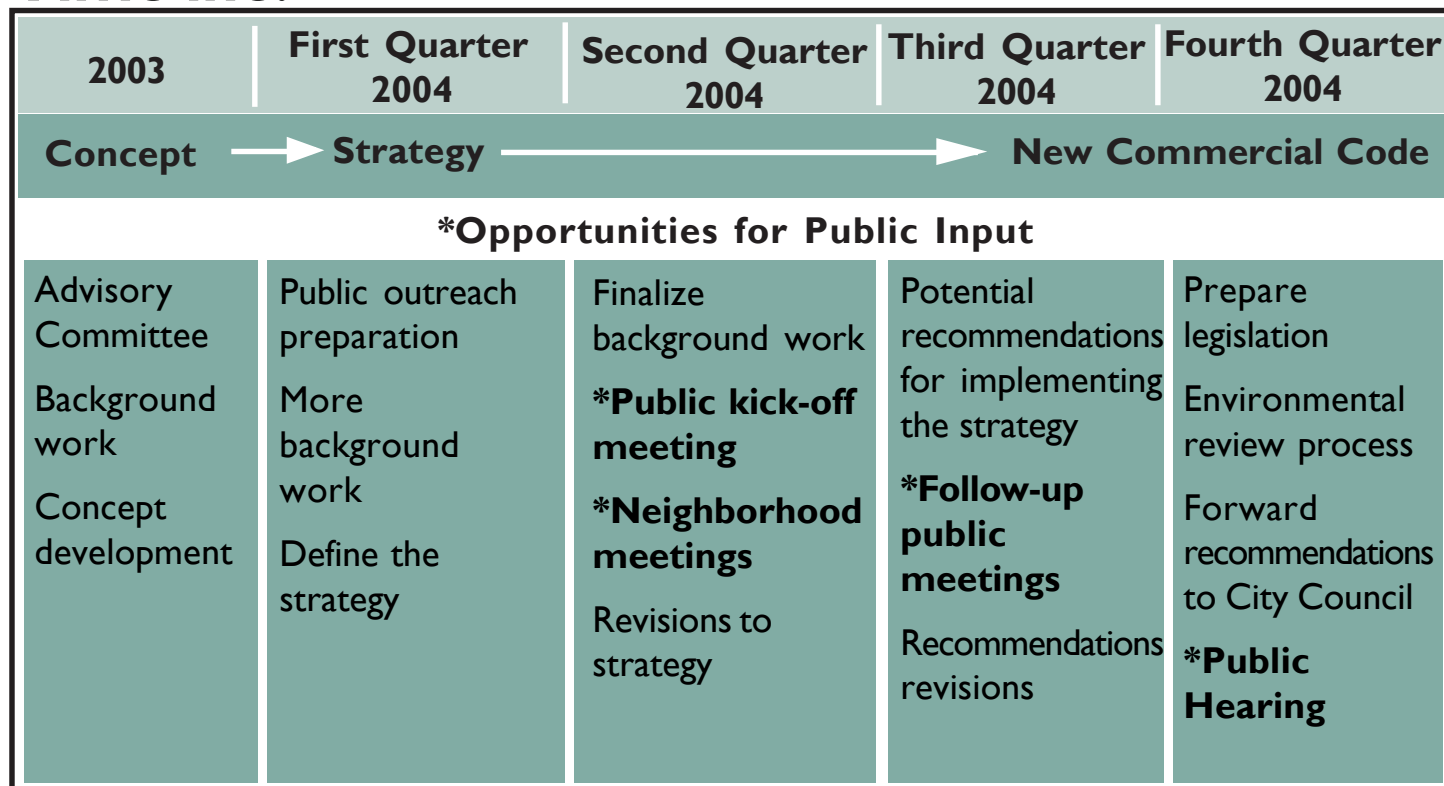
DPD anticipates that a proposal will be finalized by the end of 2004.

A public hearing will then be scheduled before the City Council to take public comments before any final action is taken on the proposal.

Please help us weigh and balance the many goals for neighborhood business districts. Your participation is indispensable to help ensure that the mixed-use centers of our neighborhoods continue to evolve as desirable places to live, work, conduct business, and meet our neighbors. Please review and answer the questions on the insert included with this brochure.

The public is invited to review and comment on NBDS through May 28, 2004.

Timeline:



Questions?



For more information on the proposed Neighborhood Business District Strategy, go to our website at www.seattle.gov/dpd/planning or contact either of the following City Planning staff:

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Street trees, awnings and inviting gathering spaces help make the cafe in this Belltown neighborhood mixed-use building a popular hangout.

